

# 2015 MENINO SURVEY OF MAYORS SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS



*The Menino Survey was initiated in 2014 by the Boston University Initiative on Cities, co-founded by former Boston Mayor and US Conference of Mayors President Tom Menino. It continues in 2015 in partnership with USCM and with the financial support of Citi.*

The 2015 Menino Survey of Mayors encompasses insights and perspectives shared by a representative sample of 89 U.S. mayors from 31 states across the nation. The objective was to take mayors' pulse on key contemporary challenges and policy issues, and identify where they turn for help in tackling them.

This year's Survey reveals specific views mayors harbor with regard to infrastructure, inequality and poverty, public safety, municipal finance, as well as their relationships with constituents and other local actors, other cities and higher levels of government.

Results and the full copy of the report, along with all of the figures noted below, are available at [www.surveyofmayors.com](http://www.surveyofmayors.com).

## KEY FINDINGS:

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** A majority of mayors surveyed reported that aging and underfunded physical infrastructure is the greatest shared challenge facing their city and identified specific projects they would prioritize for investment.

- In 2014, infrastructure topped the list of mayoral challenges. In 2015, mayors named their greatest *shared* challenge - one where they could typically rely on other government partners for help. Continued underinvestment in infrastructure rose to the top, with more than half of mayors naming it in an open-ended question as the greatest shared challenge facing their city. <sup>1</sup>[Figure 1] Topping their list of needs, overwhelmingly, is roads. [Figure 2]
- Specific "big ticket" priority projects: if mayors were the sudden beneficiaries of a large unrestricted capital grant to devote to a specific project, they would invest in mass transit (22%), roads (20%), and water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure (18%). [Figure 3]



<sup>1</sup>"Thinking about the next five years and beyond. What ONE trend or issue that you primarily think should be a state or federal matter will pose the greatest challenge to your city?"

- Modestly-priced priority projects: with a small unrestricted capital grant that they could devote to just one project, mayors would invest in bike and pedestrian infrastructure (20%), parks (19%), roads (15%) and municipal buildings (14%). [Figure 5]
- While mayors most often must partner with state and federal government to address infrastructure priorities, they're "not confident" that either will adequately help them solve their challenges.

**BIKING:** Mayors express strong support for improved accessibility for cyclists even if it means sacrificing parking or driving lanes<sup>2</sup>, in addition to naming bike infrastructure as key funding priority.

- More than 70% of mayors supported the tradeoff favoring improved bike accessibility in their city, even if it comes at the expense of parking and driving lanes. [Figure 6]
- Democratic and Republican mayors differ in their level of support for street designs that favor cyclists over drivers, with 44% of Republican mayors and 81% of Democratic ones endorsing improved bike accessibility. [Figure 7]

**POLICING:** Mayors broadly support police reforms recently advocated by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing and others, but express important reservations about some policies, including those they support in principle.

- Mayors overwhelmingly support an array of proposed reforms, including body cameras (with 93% strongly supportive/supportive), independent investigations for all police related shootings (87%), publicizing arrest and crime statistics by demographics (85%), evaluating police departments based on arrest and crime statistics (74%), and civilian review boards (65%). [Figure 9]
- Democrats and Republicans were equally committed to the reforms, evincing no differences in their high levels of support for the proposed policies. [Figure 10]
- However, as one mayor noted, "the devil's in the details." Many mayors expressed the importance of moving cautiously to protect individual rights and privacy and promote fairness.

**POVERTY AND INEQUALITY:** Cities, especially big cities, are aggressively pursuing a wide variety of policies targeting the challenges faced by low-income residents.

- The vast majority of mayors (74%) have programs that address the lack of job training and workforce development needs in their city. Approximately half of all those interviewed are focused on high housing costs (57% of responding mayors), limited access to healthy foods (54%), limited access to government social and emergency assistance programs like SNAP (51%), and limited access to living wage jobs (49%) . [Figure 11]
- Mayors are less focused on improving access to checking and savings accounts (15%) and tackling predatory lending (28%). [Figure 11]

<sup>2</sup>Mayors govern under many constraints. Framing questions as tradeoffs helps to evaluate their preferences in the context of those constraints. The specific tradeoff posed to mayors here was: "Cities should make their roads more accessible to bicycles even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking."

- Both large and small cities are aggressively tackling poverty, although big cities are taking on even more of the challenges affecting low income residents. On average, big cities are addressing more than five (5.5) challenges confronting the poor, while smaller communities are tackling just under four (3.8). Still, top priorities – job training, housing, food access, etc – are similar regardless of city size.
- While many cities have programs to address challenges faced specifically by low income residents, mayors believe inequality – the gap between rich and poor – is one area where they have limited control. They also believe constituents hold them to little account for any income inequality that may exist at the local level. [Figures 19 & 20]

**HOUSING:** Mayors, particularly those in more expensive cities, are committed to addressing high housing costs although affordable housing mandates are not universally embraced as a tool.<sup>3</sup>

- More than half of the mayors interviewed say they're aggressively addressing housing affordability in their city. [Figure 11]
- When it comes to affordable housing, mayors work with a wide array of partners but their chief allies are the federal government (named by 62% of respondents) and nonprofits (60%). [Figure 29]
- 60% of mayors governing more expensive cities support mandates requiring developers to include affordable housing in new projects, even if they deter some new development. [Figure 15]
- Overall, just 40% of mayors supported the tradeoff and affordable housing mandate. [Figure 14]
- Democratic mayors were more likely to agree with the implementation of these types of mandates. Half of Democratic mayors supported the tradeoff, compared with 20% of Republican mayors. [Figure 16]

**MUNICIPAL FINANCE:** Mayors nationwide are focused on the fiscal health of their cities, although they vary in their preferred methods to improve and stabilize it.

- Mayors believe their fiscal management skills are an important driver of constituent approval and—unlike many other areas of constituent interest—this is one where they believe they possess real control. [Figures 19 & 20].
- In order to improve their city's fiscal health, mayors would be *least* likely to raise property taxes (52% cite it as least appealing of the options), privatize city services (35%) or eliminate city programs (35%). Mayors are less opposed to other remedies, including reducing city staff (27%), raising other taxes and fees (22%), and renegotiating union contracts (24%). [Figure 17]
- Partisan distinctions did emerge in mayors' reactions to potential fiscal tools. Republicans feel stronger opposition to raising property taxes (74%) than their Democratic counterparts (43%), while Democrats are more likely to oppose privatization (45%) than Republicans (9%). [Figure 18]

<sup>3</sup>The specific tradeoff posed to mayors here was: "Cities should require developers to include more affordable housing in new projects even if doing so deters some new development."

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**CONSTRAINTS:** Mayors, regardless of party affiliation, are feeling increasingly constrained by state regulations and the aggressive efforts of some of their state legislatures to limit local autonomy. They also express frustration with the current funding environment, notably the lack of financial support available at both the federal and state levels.

- Mayors believe they receive too little financial support from state and federal government relative to other cities, and are overly burdened by restrictions from their state government. [Figures 22, 23 & 24].
- Mayors feel generally constrained by their states, but also express specific pain points. If they could repeal or change particular state laws, many would expand their local revenue-raising options (19 mentions), alter the distribution of state revenue (8 mentions), and alter idiosyncratic limitations on their policy-making autonomy (8 mentions).
- Mayors feel they have better allies at the federal level, although many can still name restrictions and regulations they would like to see changed. If mayors could repeal or change federal rules, many would revise Environmental Protection Agency rules (14 mentions), gun laws (7 mentions) and immigration laws (7 mentions).